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ISBN 0-86226-280-1

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Influencing the UK policymaking process

Conor McGrath

Encourage more communication between academics and policymakers

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Researchers and policymakers

One traditional complaint voiced by academic researchers is that their work is too often ignored by policymakers. This thesis can be summarised as follows – 'Government is not interested in the social sciences and does not listen to us; our work is consistently neglected by those who make decisions about public policy; consequently laws are based on political ideology rather than on objective studies.'

Maybe there was historically some validity to this argument, but the end result has been that researchers in general have failed to engage in a meaningful dialogue with policymakers. In fact, government depends upon receiving a flow of information from the public and private sectors. A well-known computer programming adage states 'garbage in, garbage out'. Decisions about public policy can similarly only be as good as the information on which they are based.

The present government has attempted explicitly to reach out to social science researchers, and to encourage more direct communication between academics and policymakers. While this relationship is inherently fraught with tensions, researchers should nonetheless be aware that they have the opportunity of sharing the results of their work with decision makers. To use a New Labour catchphrase, policy should be 'evidence based'.

In a major speech to an ESRC seminar in February 2000, David Blunkett (the Education and Employment Secretary) asserted that there is a more open door than ever before for academics in terms of influencing the policy agenda. Mr Blunkett called upon both researchers and policymakers to work together to ensure that official thinking on policy issues is informed by academic work.

> **"Social science should be at the heart of policymaking. We need a revolution in relations between government and the social research community – we need social scientists to help determine what works and why, and what types of policy initiatives are likely to be most effective. And we need better ways of ensuring that those who want this information can get it easily and quickly... Too often ideas are not openly discussed because of the fear of unhelpful press speculation, but if researchers become more street-wise in handling partial findings and politicians and civil servants are more relaxed about welcoming radical thinking, I am sure we can get it right."**

This attitude is now beginning to permeate Whitehall and Westminster. Researchers will increasingly find that the government takes account of their work. For instance, the Department for Education and Employment has established a new Centre for Evidence-Informed Policy and Practice which will eventually hold a comprehensive database of research on education and employment issues. The Centre will use this data to undertake systematic reviews of research findings.

Moreover, there is now a focal point for the research community located at the very centre of government. The Centre for Management and Policy Studies, based in the Cabinet Office, is developing best practice guidelines for evidence-based decision making across all policy areas – covering practical strategies not only for the provision of information by researchers, but also on training for civil servants in how to interpret and apply academic evidence.

For researchers to maximise the potential impact of their work, they must ensure that politicians and civil servants are aware of their findings. This means learning how to communicate effectively with government, and discovering the entry points into the policymaking process. Some factors are worth stressing from the outset:

- Civil servants are more likely than politicians to be interested in '*pure*' research. They tend to work in the same position for a number of years, and often specialise in very detailed and technical aspects of policy.
- Parliamentarians are generalists, who tend to focus on a handful of issues in which they are particularly interested. MPs and peers pay little attention to most of the representations they receive, and so it is crucial to begin by identifying precisely which politicians have already expressed an interest in the area of your research.
- Having identified these MPs and peers, remember that they will usually use research to the extent to which it impacts upon public policy in a practical sense. They are not necessarily engaged in a quest for objective truth, but rather are in search of information which can be used to strengthen their particular point of view.
- You should never simply write to all MPs – probably no more than 10 per cent of them will be actively concerned about the findings of your research.
- Finally, do not send a paper to any MP or civil servant without making it clear in the first paragraph of your covering letter that you are writing to them because you are aware of their previously expressed interest in the subject.

Keeping these elements in mind, the researcher must begin to develop an understanding of how the policymaking process operates. The first stage is to learn how to access the necessary information.

Information sources

Researchers obviously cannot dedicate enormous amounts of time to understanding the workings of the political system. However, a few hours will be sufficient to develop at least a rudimentary knowledge of the key processes and personnel.

- Most obviously, all government departments have their own websites, all of which can be accessed through a central address – www.open.gov.uk – which will allow the researcher to obtain information such as ministerial biographies, departmental press releases and consultation papers, organograms outlining the Civil Service hierarchy, and so on.
- The researcher can use the relevant department's website to gain some insight into the degree to which his or her work is relevant to the policies being developed and implemented by government.
- Two references books are invaluable in terms of understanding how government departments are organised. *The Civil Service Yearbook* and the *Whitehall Companion* are annual publications which list every senior civil servant.
- They provide charts showing how each department is structured, and then work through the entire hierarchy, giving information on all the policy areas covered by named civil servants.
- It is therefore possible to use either of these books to identify very precisely which officials should be contacted with information arising from social science research.
- Do bear in mind that in this era of 'joined-up government' many policy areas fall within the boundaries of more than one department, and so it is important to think about the implications of your research in a slightly lateral manner.
- Perhaps you will find yourself wanting to contact civil servants in two or three departments – as well as in the new devolved administrations, and never forgetting the Prime Minister's Policy Unit which maintains an overview of all policy issues.
- In terms of Parliament, every university library will have a number of useful reference works. Perhaps the best known is *Dod's Parliamentary Companion*, which is updated each year and provides biographical information on MPs, peers and MEPs. In addition, it has very helpful lists of MPs and peers according to their policy interests (so the researcher can identify which parliamentarians are likely to be interested in their studies) and gives the officers of backbench committees and all-party groups.
- The parliamentary website – www.parliament.uk – allows the researcher to access the transcripts of debates, to identify the members of select and standing committees, to obtain information about the progress of select committee

inquiries, to see what business has been scheduled in both Houses for the following week, and much else besides.

- Its search engine can be used to locate references to the subject of an academic's research and thus to learn which MPs and peers have taken an active interest in the issue.
- Every Thursday afternoon during the parliamentary session, the government announces what business will be dealt with by the House of Commons and the House of Lords the following week. So researchers should get into the habit of accessing the parliamentary website on Friday mornings to learn if there will be any relevant debates, questions, select committee meetings and standing committee sessions the next week. If so, it is then possible for the researcher to write to MPs and peers who will be involved in those activities.

Some of the terms used in this section (such as 'select committees') may not yet be familiar to many researchers, but will be explained throughout the course of this booklet.

Parliamentary procedures

Parliamentary procedures offer a range of opportunities which researchers can take to raise awareness of their findings.

Debates

Debates that do not involve legislation generally take two main forms – substantive motions and adjournment motions:

- Substantive motions are those that express a definite opinion or viewpoint. Many are initiated by the government, on subjects ranging from the Budget to foreign affairs.
- Others are tabled by the opposition parties, and these are more often that not intended to embarrass the government by calling attention to an issue which has been mishandled.
- The second form of motion that does not relate to legislation is the adjournment motion, of which the most common is the daily adjournment debate. This takes place after all other business has been conducted and lasts for 30 minutes.
- It essentially is an opportunity for a backbench MP to raise a subject for 15 minutes and then to receive a reply from a government minister.
- The government also sponsors adjournment debates because it is not possible to offer amendments to the motion 'That this House do now adjourn'. Thus, when a government adjournment debate takes the form of a debate on a controversial aspect of government policy, there is no real opportunity for the government to be defeated.

Questions

It is believed that the first oral parliamentary question was asked in the House of Lords in 1721, on the subject of the South Sea Company. Since then, the practice has become highly organised, so that each government department answers oral questions about every four weeks. During oral questions, each MP whose question has been selected (by means of a ballot) will be invited by the Speaker to ask their question, and the minister will respond by reading out the answer prepared by his or her civil servants.

Because the original question has to be submitted a fortnight in advance, to allow an answer to be drafted, there is not a great deal of room for spontaneity at this stage. However, once the tabled question has been answered, the MP who asked it is allowed to ask a further, supplementary, question, as are several other MPs interested in that particular issue. The supplementary must relate to the general issue raised in the original question, but it can be very specific and the minister has no prior notice of supplementaries, so oral questions call for ministers to be capable of thinking quickly on their feet.

Every MP (and peer) is also entitled to ask as many written questions as he or she wishes, and indeed thousands of written questions are tabled every year. They tend to be used to elicit information of a factual nature from ministers, while oral questions are often a means of scoring political points.

Social science researchers whose work throws up questions about the effectiveness of particular policy areas may want to consider alerting an MP to this and suggesting that it be drawn to a minister's attention through a parliamentary question.

Committees

One of the most common forms of committee in the House of Commons is called a select committee. Many select committees are charged with overseeing the work of a government department:

- These Departmental Select Committees have been established "*to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the principal Government Departments... and associated public bodies*". So, for example, there are select committees dealing with Northern Ireland, Education and Employment, Trade and Industry, Foreign Affairs, Home Affairs, Social Security, and so on.
- Their membership is roughly in proportion to the size of each of the parties in the House of Commons as a whole, and therefore the government of the day always

has a majority on each select committee, although about half of them are chaired – by mutual agreement – by a senior opposition MP.

- Select committees are empowered to "*send for persons, papers and records*" that they consider necessary to conduct an inquiry.
- Before starting work on an inquiry, a select committee will publish a press release outlining the terms of reference of the inquiry and calling for written submissions from interested parties.
- Once these representations have been received and read, the committee will draw up a list of people to give oral evidence so that they can be questioned on the points raised by their written paper.
- Select committee inquiries represent a very useful opportunity for researchers to influence how relevant MPs think about a particular issue. The committees usually try to work as much as possible on the basis of cross-party consensus, and therefore they display a degree of free thinking which allows researchers to approach them to some effect.
- Aside from this, select committees are generally very eager to take oral evidence from academics; researchers should make a point of checking the parliamentary website regularly to see if any new select committee inquiries have been launched in relevant areas, and if so, then submit a paper.
- Following each inquiry, select committees issue a report to which the government must respond.

The House of Lords also has a number of select committees, two of which are particularly influential. The Select Committee on Science and Technology operates primarily through its two sub-committees, each of which will be engaged in a detailed inquiry at any given time. Subjects which have been considered in recent years have included medical research and the NHS reforms, academic careers for graduate scientists, the information superhighway, and the decommissioning of oil and gas installations.

This committee is particularly well respected, not only by peers and the government, but by academia and industry. Its reports will invariably be debated in the House and receive a written response from the government. The House of Lord's European Communities Select Committee considers EU proposals.

In addition to these formal committees, there are a wide variety of internal party committees:

- Both main parties operate a series of backbench committees on particular policy areas – for instance, the Conservative health committee and the Labour transport committee.
- These committees tend to meet every four or six weeks, usually to hear a presentation from an outside expert.
- In both the Labour and Conservative parties, these groups are very important in terms of policy development. At the minute, the officers of the Labour backbench committees will have ready access to relevant ministers. And currently, when the Conservative party is in opposition, its backbench committees are chaired by the relevant Shadow Cabinet members, and are thus very closely involved in the party's internal policymaking processes.
- Outside organisations (and academics) regularly approach the officers of backbench committees for assistance in promoting an issue.
- If a researcher approaches the officers of any backbench committee with an offer to address the group, they may find that backbench committees are a useful – if informal – opportunity to influence policymakers.

Finally, a large number of all-party groups exist which relate to either a subject or a country of common interest and MPs and peers of any party can join these. They include groups on AIDS, the pharmaceutical industry, Cuba, Spain, and Esperanto. All-party groups can be very receptive to contacts with outside bodies and individuals, and can provide a forum for well-informed discussion and analysis. They thereby act as a reasonably influential (although informal) pressure on ministers and policymakers. Again, proactive social science researchers will target the members of these groups and keep them updated about relevant issues.

Political parties and think-tanks

Obviously politicians tend to be members of political parties, and it is important not to overlook the role of the parties in formulating policy:

- Many policies are overtly political rather than administrative, and so the main impetus behind them will have come from within the parties.
- For instance, while in opposition before the last general election, the Labour party was engaged in a whole series of policy reviews which eventually culminated in their election manifesto.
- Parties fight general elections on the basis of their manifestos – essentially a manifesto represents a promise to the electorate that if the party wins office it will implement the ideas in the manifesto.
- This is taken seriously in British politics – to the point where the House of Lords

(which is unelected) has a convention that it will not vote against any Bill which was specifically mentioned in the governing party's manifesto at the previous election.

- However, it is true that policymaking is still relatively informal within the parties. They all obviously have teams of researchers whose job it is to come up with good ideas which can be translated into policy commitments. These people are well located in terms of their access to their party's MPs and so should themselves be a focus for social science researchers.
- Each of the parties has established a number of policy groups, which may include politicians, party members and outside experts. While this means that it is relatively easy for academic researchers to gain access to the parties' internal policymaking structures, the reality is that many make little or no effort to do so.

Another opportunity for academic researchers to influence policymakers lies in a group of organisations whose explicit purpose is to interest politicians in ideas – think-tanks. These bodies exist to supply the political parties with broad concepts which can then serve as the foundation for detailed policy thought. Many operate across the spectrum of policy issues, while others tend to focus on a few particular areas. Some are well connected with the Labour party, others are respected by the Conservative party, and others again are generally independent.

What unites them is that they are involved in politics as a battle of ideas. As such, think-tanks are always eager to find new, even radical, thinking about policy issues. This makes them a natural target for social science researchers wishing to influence the policy agenda.

Whitehall

Ministers

As senior politicians, ministers are highly public and visible people:

- It is therefore very easy to identify which ministers in which departments have responsibility for the policy issues relevant to any researcher's work.
- The academic should, however, bear in mind that every department will have from three to eight ministers and that as a consequence they divide up the range of policy issues between themselves.
- Influencing policy at this level depends upon first adopting a precisely targeted approach – don't simply assume that every minister in the Department for Education and Employment will take an equal interest in any particular policy area.
- Find out which minister deals with your subject – this information is available in the reference books and on the departments' websites – and only send information about your research to that particular minister.
- There is an important exception to this rule – many policy issues cut across the boundaries of several departments and so a number of ministers are involved in their development.
- Much work of this nature is conducted through a system of Cabinet committees. Their terms of reference, and membership, are available from the Cabinet Office.
- Academic researchers may want to consider circulating summaries of their studies to the members of any Cabinet committee which deals with relevant policy. Even if the submission is not seen directly by the ministers themselves, it will be taken into account by their officials.
- Do keep in mind that ministers are less readily accessible than ordinary MPs and peers. It can be difficult to reach ministers as they are shielded from the outside world to some extent by their civil servants. Academics may therefore want to consider using the media to promote their research findings – both as a goal in itself, and also as a way of communicating indirectly with ministers.

Civil service

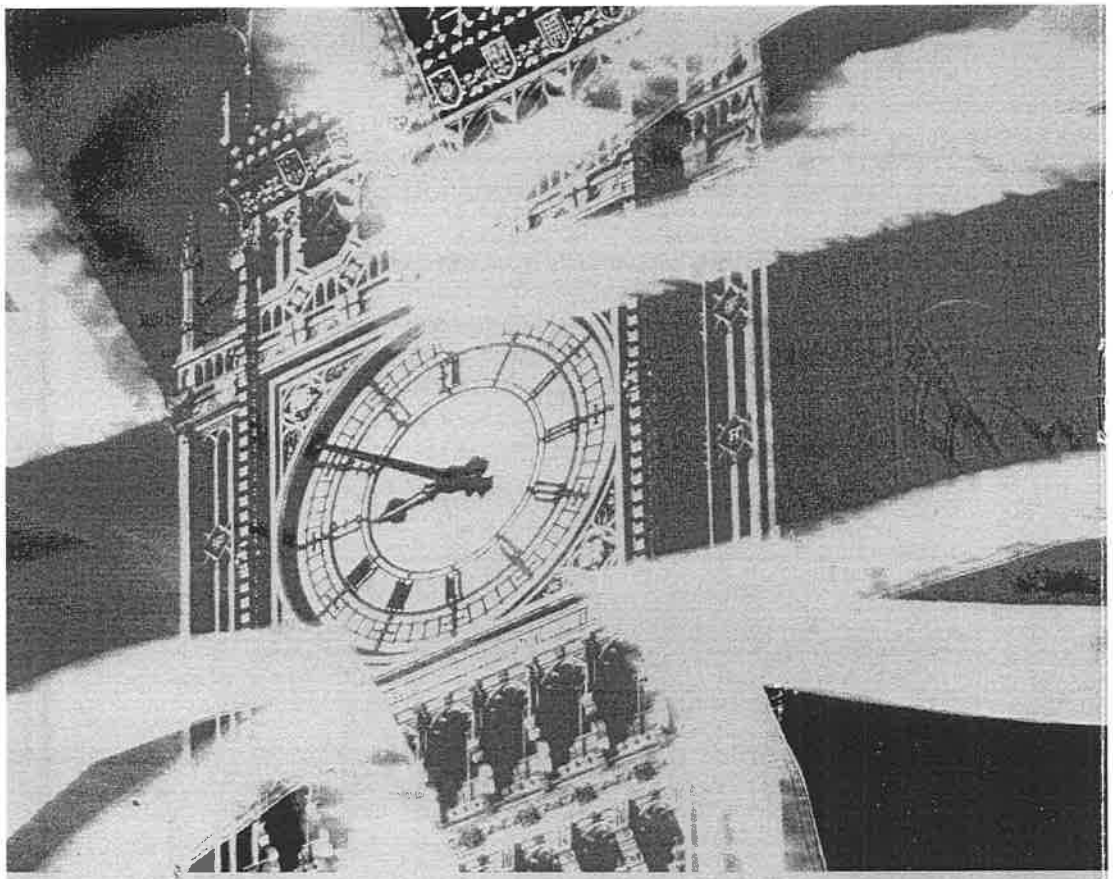
Much of the detailed thinking about the development and implementation of government policy is undertaken by civil servants:

- At the head of every government department is its most senior official, the permanent secretary. At the next step down, there are likely to be perhaps six or seven deputy secretaries or directors who oversee the work of individual policy directorates.
- And then each directorate is subdivided into a number of different sections which handle specific elements of that policy area. Each of these sections will then be split up again, so that it becomes possible to work down the whole chain of command to determine precisely which civil servants work on specific policy issues.

The most basic rule in communicating with civil servants is to understand where power and influence are actually located within the hierarchy, and then to make your approach at that level. Very often business people assume that they should start at the top, whereas in fact the opposite is true. Permanent secretaries are equivalent to the chief executives of large corporations, and as such they only concern themselves with issues of the highest importance.

When an academic researcher wants to ensure that a government department is kept informed of his or her work, it is crucial to identify those few civil servants who have responsibility for that policy area:

- It is these officials, probably five or six grades from the top of a department, who will provide the first draft of analysis and advice on the relevant policy.
- Influence them, and you can influence all those at higher levels.



"One of the most important features of the British Civil Service is that it is permanent and apolitical."

- The section on information sources above provides details of reference books which can be used to identify those officials who work on particular policy subjects.

One of the most important features of the British Civil Service is that it is permanent and apolitical. In Britain, senior civil servants are not appointed for political reasons, and they will loyally serve governments of any political party. The convention is that politicians make policy (largely based on Civil Service advice) and civil servants then implement the policy, whether or not they happen personally to agree with it. While that is true in theory, the reality is that civil servants should attract the attention of social science researchers because their advice to ministers is so significant in the framing of policy proposals. And, of course, civil servants tend to become highly expert in their individual areas of responsibility while ministers have such a high turnover rate that it is difficult for them to become fully immersed in all the nuances of policy for which they do exercise ultimate responsibility.

Special advisers

One institution which straddles the political and administrative worlds is a relatively recent phenomenon. All Cabinet ministers, and some middle-ranking ministers, have at least one special adviser:

- A special adviser is appointed personally by the minister, but all are subject to the approval of the Prime Minister.
- Their job essentially is to organise the political (as opposed to the official) side of the minister's life – to write his or her political speeches, to advise the minister on the political impact of policy issues, to brief the media on political matters, and to receive representations about the minister's responsibilities from outside organisations (and researchers).
- Special advisers are generally full-time political appointees, but when they take up the post they become temporary civil servants, paid from public funds and based in the minister's department.
- As such, some restrictions are placed on their personal political activity – they must resign their post, for instance, if they are selected as a candidate for election to the Commons or the European Parliament. Special advisers are, however, allowed to attend party functions and participate in party policymaking reviews – these are in fact significant elements of their jobs.
- A special adviser will be one of the most important sources of political intelligence for the minister, and therefore needs to have a wide network of contacts from whom he or she can pick up ideas.
- The special adviser is certainly expected to act as a channel of communication from outside bodies and individuals to the minister.

- Given their unrivalled access to ministers, organisations are keen to win the ear of a special adviser, knowing that they are able to present information directly to the minister without having to go through the filter of the Civil Service.
- Academics, too, should identify relevant special advisers and make an effort to keep them informed about the findings of key social science research.
- Unsurprisingly, the Prime Minister has perhaps a dozen special advisers, known as the Policy Unit. Again, these individuals specialise in particular policy areas, such as Europe, social security, and transport.

The legislative process

Most successful legislation is introduced by the government, because the government controls the parliamentary timetable and can usually rely upon sufficient votes to ensure the passage of its measures.

Government legislation

Consultation

Most new law initiated by the government follows a fairly formal process of consultation. The first stage of the legislative process is often the publication of a green paper. This consultation document outlines the possible policy changes and invites responses from interested parties.

These responses are then considered by the relevant government department before it makes definite policy proposals. The proposals will then be published as a white paper, which is essentially a statement of government intentions. Again, written submissions can be made.

Academic researchers with relevant studies should certainly submit responses to both green and white papers in an effort to influence the government's thinking about the issue. Once a Bill has been introduced in Parliament, the government will usually be reluctant to accept many amendments to the legislation (other than those which ministers themselves propose). So it is important for the academic to attempt to influence policy proposals while they are still at the development stage.

Parliamentary stages

After government has considered all the responses received, it will produce a Bill and present it to Parliament for scrutiny. Most Bills can be introduced in either the House of Commons or the House of Lords. For the sake of simplicity, we'll assume that the Bill first goes to the House of Commons:

- It will receive its first reading without debate – this is just a formality whereby the House agrees that the Bill should be printed before it is considered further.
- The Bill then is given a date for its second reading, which is the occasion for a major debate (lasting at least one day) on the general purpose and principles of the Bill.
- Because second reading is the point at which the government is seeking Parliament's approval of the legislation, a second reading debate is an ideal opportunity for researchers to circulate details of their work to those MPs who take an interest in the policy issues raised by the Bill.
- To have an impact, these papers need to begin with a short summary explaining the findings and their relevance to the legislation being debated. Researchers should provide MPs with no more than two or three pages of bullet points at this stage; if any MP wants more detail, they will contact you for it.
- Assuming that the Bill has been given a second reading by the House of Commons, it then moves into a standing committee (of around 18 to 24 MPs), which scrutinises the Bill line by line in great detail and has the power to amend the Bill.
- There is potential at this stage for researchers to have an impact because it often only requires two or three government MPs on the committee to vote against any detail of the Bill for that to be overturned.
- Academics should certainly send all members of the standing committee a further paper of four to five pages indicating how their research relates to particular provisions of the Bill – the parliamentary website can be used to find out which MPs have been appointed to each standing committee.
- The government will also use standing committee stage to introduce its own amendments in the light of ideas expressed during the second reading debate.
- Once the whole Bill has been considered by a standing committee, it is then reprinted to include the amendments which have been made, and returns to the floor of the House of Commons for report stage so that the House has an opportunity to consider the amendments. Finally, the Bill is given its third reading by the Commons, which is simply a formality.
- Now that the Bill has been passed by the House of Commons, it moves over to the House of Lords where it goes through the same process again. This is to allow the Lords to review the proposed legislation and to suggest any amendments it thinks are necessary.
- However, unlike the Commons, nearly all Bills are debated on the floor of the House of Lords, and any peer can take part.

- Academics should remember that at least one expert can be found on virtually every subject in the House of Lords. Very often, peers are appointed on the basis of a lifetime's professional career. Therefore, the quality of debate in the House of Lords can be extremely high, and researchers should find peers capable of understanding even the most technical and detailed briefings.
- All peers who are known to take an interest in the policy area should similarly be sent a brief paper by academics prior to the second reading debate; then, every peer who speaks in the second reading debate could usefully be circulated with a slightly longer representation before the committee stage is taken in the House of Lords.
- When the Bill has been through all the stages in the Lords, it returns again to the Commons so MPs can vote on any changes made by the House of Lords.
- If the Commons disagree with any Lords' amendments, they can send them back to the House of Lords. However, if the Lords refuses to back down, the House of Commons is entitled to insist on getting its way, because it is the chamber elected by the people at a general election.
- Once both Houses have agreed on identical versions of the Bill, it is sent to the Queen for her automatic approval.

Private Members' Bills

There are also several other types of Bills initiated by ordinary MPs and peers rather than the government, and they essentially go through the same process of parliamentary scrutiny. In the Commons, the main difference between government Bills and Private Members' Bills is that at the report stage of a Private Member's Bill any MP can table amendments even if they have previously been rejected in the committee stage. The advice given (in relation to government legislation) about how and when academics should contact MPs and peers with details of any relevant research equally applies to Private Members' Bills.

Controversial Private Members' Bills are vulnerable to opposition from even a single sufficiently dedicated MP. Because only a limited amount of Commons time is available on Fridays to debate Private Members' Bills, if one MP opposes a particular Bill he or she can attempt to filibuster it by talking at length on another Bill being considered first. Conversely, if a Private Member's Bill is very uncontroversial, it can be difficult for the sponsoring MP to persuade sufficient of his or her colleagues to remain in Westminster for its debate on a Friday in order to ensure the necessary quorum of 40.

Annual ballot

The best-known way for a backbench MP to bring forward a piece of legislation is by entering the annual ballot (held near the start of each session in the autumn) for Private Members' Bills:

- Twenty names are drawn in the ballot, and parliamentary time will be set aside for consideration of the Bills introduced by these successful MPs.
- When the ballot is being made, the room in which it takes place is invariably crowded with lobbyists and pressure groups all wanting to give briefing papers and suggestions for legislation to the successful MPs.
- About one-third of the 400 or so MPs who enter the ballot will have done so with a particular legislative objective.
- Most of those who enter are amenable to suggestions if they happen to win a place. They then have the option of introducing a piece of legislation already largely drafted and promoted by a lobbyist or pressure group.
- In 1986, a survey of more than 250 interest groups, ranging from large bodies such as the TUC and CBI to consumer groups and small charities, found that 27 per cent had asked an MP to introduce or sponsor a Private Member's Bill. Since then, the number of organisations aware of the opportunities provided by the Private Member's Bill ballot has increased significantly, evidenced by the intensity with which MPs are lobbied running up to and directly after the ballot.
- While academic researchers are unlikely to have draft Bills prepared for consideration by MPs, it is nevertheless true that once an MP has decided what policy issue to address in his or her Bill they will generally be very willing to listen to academics on the detail of the Bill.
- Backbench MPs receive virtually no official support in producing Bills, and do not have the resources of the Civil Service to fall back on in terms of detailed analysis of policy options. As a result, they rely on research produced by pressure groups, trade association, and academics.
- After the ballot, the successful MPs have around three weeks to decide what issue to address in their Bills. So researchers should check the parliamentary website regularly in November to see what area each of the 20 MPs intends to tackle.

Ten Minute Rule Bills

The second mechanism by which MPs can introduce legislation is known as the Ten Minute Rule, because on certain days an MP can apply for ten minutes to outline why a particular Bill should be given a second reading. After this speech, only one other MP is permitted to oppose the measure, also for ten minutes. A vote is then taken, and if the Bill is not defeated it moves on to the other stages of the legislative process in the normal manner. This route is more often used to gain publicity than with the serious hope that such a Bill will become law. In fact, it can be a very effective means of winning publicity, as Ten Minute Rule Bills are taken just after question time when the House of Commons is fairly full. Academics who wish to draw attention to a particular situation could certainly consider approaching MPs with the suggestion that it would be an appropriate subject for a Ten Minute Rule Bill.

Presentation Bills

Any MP can simply introduce a Bill at any time by giving notice that they intend to do so. Only the most uncontroversial measure can have any chance of success through what is known as the Presentation Bill route, because they cannot receive a second reading if even a single MP objects. One of the best known examples of a Presentation Bill reaching the statute book is perhaps the Protection of Birds (Amendment) Bill, which received all its Commons stages in a mere 67 seconds in 1976.

Surprisingly, however, Presentations Bills do generally have a higher success rate than Ten Minute Rule Bills, for one primary reason. Many Ten Minute Rule Bills are introduced to indicate the MP's interest in the subject, while many Presentations Bills are given to backbench MPs by ministers as a means of achieving a small change to some law without using any government time on the floor of the House. Therefore, they can count on official support, without which a Presentation Bill cannot hope to succeed. The titles of Presentation Bills indicate that the successful ones tend to be quite technical and specific – Licensing (Amendment)(Scotland), Common Land (Rectification of Registers), for instance.

House of Lords

Peers are able to introduce Bills in the House of Lords at any stage in the parliamentary year, although few avail themselves of this opportunity. However, if a Private Member's Bill in the Lords did manage to get through the legislative process there, the peer sponsoring it would seek to persuade an MP to introduce it in the Commons. If it was similarly successful in the Commons, the Bill would become law.

> "Any MP can simply introduce a Bill at any time by giving notice that they intend to do so."

Devolution

While this booklet has dealt primarily with Westminster and Whitehall, the academic researcher must keep in mind the fact that responsibility for many policy issues has now passed to the devolved institutions in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It is therefore necessary to spend a little time investigating whether any of these bodies now deal with any policy matter which impinges upon the individual researcher's work.

In such a short guide as this, the best advice is quite simply to look up the relevant websites – www.northernireland.gov.uk (for links to the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive), www.scottish.parliament.uk (for links to the Scottish Parliament and Executive), and www.wales.gov.uk (for links to the Welsh Assembly and Executive). These sites will enable the researcher to determine whether they should be communicating with policymakers in any of the three regions and, if so, who precisely it would be appropriate to contact. (The same is true of www.london.gov.uk, which provides information about the Greater London Authority and the Mayor of London.) They all have search engines which will allow the researcher to identify which members and ministers have taken an interest in the policy area relevant to the researcher's work.

All the general advice given in this pamphlet about the points of entry into the policymaking process and how best to communicate with policymakers in Westminster and Whitehall apply equally to the three sets of devolved institutions, although the precise parliamentary and legislative processes which operate may vary slightly between the regions.

Europe

Some researchers may also seek to influence policymaking at the European level. Although it is not possible in such a short booklet as this to outline the various European Union institutions and procedures, nevertheless all the advice which has been given in terms of effective communication with decision makers does apply to the EU. So, there (just as here), it is important to:

- Identify those politicians and officials who are relevant to your subject area.

- Monitor the activities of these people.
- Communicate with them in a timely and professional fashion.

Perhaps the best – and most comprehensive – starting point for any researcher who wants to develop an understanding of policymaking in the EU is to access www.europa.eu.int – the official site of the European Parliament, Council of Ministers and European Commission. That site can be used to obtain information covering all the official European Union institutions – including press releases, a schedule of forthcoming events and meetings, the text of official documents, and sources of further information.

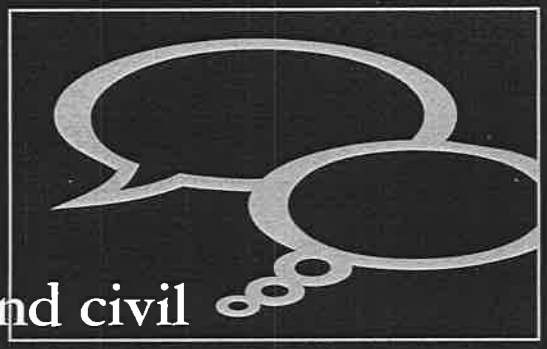
The methods of influencing EU policymakers is much as has been described in this booklet, so the researcher can overlay that general material with the specifics of the policy process as it is operated in the European Union.

Communicating with policymakers

Given this brief description of the policymaking process and the various points of entry into it which social science researchers can make use of, it becomes necessary to develop an awareness of how best to communicate with decision makers.

While this is essentially straightforward, it does require the specialised knowledge provided in this booklet. Influencing policymakers has ultimately to be based upon an ability to provide them with useful and objective information. Given this, it then becomes necessary for the social science researcher to adhere to some basic rules:

- A scatter-gun approach will never be effective – do not write to all MPs or ministers. Rather, the researcher should invest a little time in identifying those MPs, peers, ministers and civil servants who have a genuine interest in relevant policy areas.
- Check the website of any relevant departments regularly to keep track of policy announcements, press releases, ministerial speeches and consultation papers.
- Look at the parliamentary website every Friday morning to find out whether any pertinent debates or committee meetings have been scheduled for the following week – if so, that provides an opportunity to contact those policymakers who may be able to make use of your research findings.
- When making an initial approach to a policymaker, it is crucial to tell him or her within the first paragraph of your letter that they are being written to because you know of their previous interest in the subject. MPs, peers and civil servants receive hundreds of letters a week – you must grab their attention quickly.
- Briefing documents supplied to MPs and peers should, as a rule, be no longer than three pages – if they want further detail, they will request it. Civil servants are happy to receive longer documents, but then an executive summary should be provided.
- All politicians are voracious consumers of the press and broadcast media, so academics can use the media to publicise their research and thus indirectly communicate with decision makers.
- One route which is often neglected by academics is offered by the House of Commons Library, which produces hundreds of research papers and briefs for MPs every year. Its staff have a constant need for good information in all policy areas – call the parliamentary switchboard on 0207 219 3000 to find out which library staff work on particular policy issues.
- MPs and peers tend to be most interested in research which has an obvious and immediate potential to impact upon a current policy issue. Civil servants usually take a longer-term perspective and so it is less imperative to tie in the provision of information to them to specific parliamentary business.
- Don't forget to take advantage of the additional opportunities offered by the existence of the devolved institutions in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.
- There are information offices in Westminster, the Scottish Parliament, and the Welsh and Northern Irish Assemblies. Their function is to provide members of the public with factual information on such matters as committee memberships, forthcoming business, parliamentary and legislative procedures, and so on. Use this resource – their staff will be as helpful as possible.



"MPs, peers and civil servants receive hundreds of letters a week – you must grab their attention quickly."

Conclusion

Social science researchers are particularly well placed to influence the policymaking process and the political agenda, given a very little specialised knowledge. They possess detailed research findings; they have a reputation for independence and objectivity; they are strong communicators on paper; and there are many entry points into the policymaking system which are readily accessible to academics.

Too often, though, researchers fail to make the most of this situation. With only a little more effort, social scientists could have a great deal more impact upon the thinking of policymakers. The purpose of this pamphlet is to provide researchers with the basic level of understanding they need to have about how government and Parliament function, and to indicate some of the opportunities which are available to the proactive researcher. Beyond this, the External Relations department of the ESRC can advise researchers on precisely how to maximise the influence they can exert on policymakers.